

Kostov, Alexander

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(Un)Seeing is (Un)Belonging: The power of Sight in “Vision” by Alistair MacLeod and “Eyestone” by D. R. MacDonald

Le non-voir et le non-appartenir: Le pouvoir de la vue dans « Vision » d'Alistair MacLeod et « Eyestone » de D. R. MacDonald

Alexander Kostov

Abstract

The article examines the notions of *seeing* and *belonging* as being central to the short story tradition of Nova Scotia, exemplified here by two of the region's most prominent writers: Alistair MacLeod and D. R. MacDonald. The stories analyzed (namely, in “Vision” and “Eyestone”) further support the idea of the role of tradition and history as being central to the short fiction of Nova Scotia; also shown are how the problems and difficulties that arise between the opposition *mainland/island* very often lead to problems with understanding or even an inability to find one's place in the world. Analyzing the two texts in detail, the author argues that the two authors pay special attention to tradition as a central tool in their repertoire and that the problems outlined very often oscillate between the notions of *seeing/unseeing* as prerequisites for *belonging/unbelonging*.

Keywords: sight, identity, Nova Scotia, mainland, island

Resumé

L'article examine les notions de *voir* et *d'éprouver un sentiment d'appartenance* qui sont au centre de la tradition des nouvelles néo-écossaises, une tradition illustrée ici par les deux écrivains les plus en vue : Alistair MacLeod et D. R. MacDonald (plus précisément dans « Vision » et « Eyestone »). Les nouvelles analysées soutiennent davantage l'idée que le rôle de la tradition et de l'histoire est au centre des nouvelles de la Nouvelle-Écosse et que les problèmes et les difficultés qui surgissent dans l'opposition continent/île (*mainland/island*) entraînent souvent des problèmes de compréhension ou une incapacité à trouver sa place dans le monde. Après avoir analysé en détail les deux textes, l'auteur défend l'argument selon lequel MacLeod et MacDonald accordent une attention particulière à la tradition en tant qu'outil central de leur œuvre et que les problèmes qu'ils soulignent oscillent très



souvent entre les notions de *voir* / *ne pas voir*, comprises comme une condition nécessaire pour éprouver ou ne pas éprouver un sentiment d'*appartenance*.

Mots-clés : vue, identité, Nouvelle-Écosse, continent, île

Introduction

When one encounters the name “Nova Scotia” for the first time, one often thinks about one thing in general: what is this “New Scotland” doing in Canada, and how did that come to be? The name *Nova Scotia* can be traced back to 1621, due to some occasional Scottish settlements. However, today it is 1773, when the greatest part of the Scottish emigration took place on the board of *Hector*, which is now celebrated as the founding year for Canadian Scots. Why is it so important to introduce these historical facts to the reader? Mainly because it was the Scots (and the Irish to some extent) that brought with them traditions and customs that still resonate strongly in literature and folk tales of present-day writers and poets from the province. Their community was closely-knit; they paid special, almost holy, attention to language and kinship, as is evident in the two stories on which this paper focuses.

The Scots came for the prospect of owning land, being free of landlords, while seeking better opportunities for their children. That said, one salient moment in Scotland’s history marked the Scottish community in Canada for life, and echoed (and still does) in the works of the authors from the region – namely, the *Fuadaichean nan Gàidheal* (“the eviction of the Gaels”), or more simply The Highland Clearances of the 18th and 19th centuries. In a few words, these clearances resulted in a great number of Scots emigrating either to the Scottish Lowlands in order to be closer to home, or to Australia and North America, in search of a better life. Since the historical aspect is not one of central importance to this paper, but is still inseparable from the examined literature, I confine myself here to a simple introduction, and then will move forward to the authors and works referred to in the title.

The reason I mentioned the Highland Clearances from the 18th and 19th centuries stems from the fact that in both Alistair MacLeod’s “Vision” and D. R. MacDonald’s “Eyestone” the Scottish heritage of the characters plays an important role in defining tradition, the protagonists’ place in the world, their past, present or/and future, and their families altogether. Language, too, is of great importance for both writers, and they pay it considerable respect –presenting entire sentences in Gaelic, giving children and grandchildren Gaelic names, or just sticking strongly to the Gaelic customs and traditions, despite the overall decline of the language itself.



In the second half of the 19th century, Gaelic was the third most spoken language in Nova Scotia, after English and French. However, after the 1850s, the people who spoke and used Gaelic for various purposes began to dwindle in number, leading to an overall decline in the use of language. Some of the factors that are worth mentioning for this decadence involved school and government politics, the increased influence and prestige of English, some biases concerning the state of Gaelic; further mockeries and anecdotes added to the overall opinion that Gaelic was a language consigned to oblivion, or just suited to poetry and fairy tales. And this is exactly why I pay such attention to the role of Gaelic in the province and its influence, for it is important to consider the language's history.

Alistair MacLeod and D. R. MacDonald are important figures in the literature of Nova Scotia and they embody characteristic features that are part and parcel of the literature from the province. The main topic of *seeing/unseeing as belonging/unbelonging* is linked to the idea that the region (mostly that of Cape Breton) is characterized by strong ties to the recent and not-so-recent past, and very often presents considerable clashes between the new and the old, between the imported and the inherited, between past and present. What is more, the sense of belonging and identity is strongly felt and expressed in the respective works by the two authors, for it connects with the idea of Canada as a place where, despite the various histories and cultures, it is the Canadian identity that must endure. This sense of belonging is also linked to the efforts and sacrifices that people are willing to make, and the understanding they exhibit towards the fast-changing present and foreseeable future. My most salient point pertains to the power of sight (represented through various mediums) and how it affects the sense of belonging to both the particular region of Nova Scotia and to Canada as a whole.

A brief look at Maritime literature

Ushering the reader into the realm of Alistair MacLeod and D. R. MacDonald's stories requires an acquaintance of sorts with the literature of the province. Generally speaking, the literature of Nova Scotia (and the Maritimes in general) could be broken down into two periods: that of the 18th-19th century, and that of the 20th century. During the first period, literature of exploration flourished, journals and personal narratives comprising the greatest part, Indian and French skirmishes, letters and diaries. Later on, the writers began to elevate their register, to incorporate new elements into their writings – after the American Revolutionary War, a lot of Loyalists fled to the Maritimes and transported their literary prowess with them, thus adding flavour to the stagnant literature of the province, though there was some criticism



that the literature provided did not belong to Canada, but to the American and British traditions.

The literature from the second period, the 20th century (and onwards), is characterized greatly by the uncertainty that has loomed over the Eastern part of Canada in terms of economy and politics. Despite the big names of L. M. Montgomery, Hugh MacLennan, Ernest Buckler, Thomas Raddall and many more, for most of the century, those writers felt smothered by the authors from “central” Canada – Alice Munro, Timothy Findley, or Margaret Atwood. Nova Scotia has moved to the margins of society and the literary aspect of the region reflected that in the best way possible. David Creelman even claims that “the Atlantic provinces are linked by their common struggle against the economic hardship of underdevelopment and underemployment” (Creelman 2003, 3).

Alistair MacLeod’s “Vision”

Alistair MacLeod’s stories revolve mainly around the ordinary and economically handicapped mining and fishing region of Cape Breton, where the characters are destined (and very often doomed) to walk in their parents’ shoes in order to make a living. The bonds and responsibilities that exist between the generations very often result in difficulties, problems, and denial that generally stem from the younger generation facing the old. In many of MacLeod’s stories the reader bumps into difficult relationships between fathers and sons, between wives and constantly absent husbands, and even between grandchildren and their grandparents. Furthermore, the author pays special attention to the storytelling in order to help the reader as well as the narrator to find the meaning that has been lost due to a parent’s death, absence, or, indeed, non-existence. By doing that, MacLeod relies heavily on the reader’s ability to *see* and *understand* the stories that are presented to them, so that they can find their own place in the story world. Hence the this article’s main focus on the power of *seeing* (or *unseeing*) as a core prerequisite for one’s sense of belonging to the created world of the short story, and thus it would help to outline that salient element in regional Nova Scotia short story writing – the search for identity through finding one’s place in the world. “Vision,” the penultimate story in the collection *Island* is such an example where the power of *seeing* the story is presented as one of the best ways of reconciling with the past and understanding the present. Moreover, it clearly exemplifies the power of seeing as being part of one’s belonging to the particular culture – those who have the *vision* adapt easily and more properly to the present Canadian way of life.

“Vision” tells of a narrator who hears a story from his father’s past, when his father and uncle went on a trip to visit their grandparents on the island of Canna, which is



overflowing with the old Gaelic traditions and is seen by outsiders as a strange place. There they met an old blind woman, who appeared to have been in love with their grandfather, though he later left her for another woman. Near the end of the trip, the two boys are told the story about their grandfather and the old woman, as well as the *second sight* ability of some people from the distant past, which played and still plays an important role in the lives of the contemporary generations. At the end of the story, the old blind woman dies in a fire, and the story of the second sight (and how one must sacrifice his physical sight for the metaphysical one) is transplanted into the present. As a result, tradition seems to overstep the boundaries of time and the past errors and happenings are reflected in the present moment, taking their toll on the protagonists' offspring. Throughout the whole story, the telling of past events and of tales surrounding the mysterious happenings is of great importance, for it creates a framework for the entire narrative. And from the very first sentence, the reader is presented with the storytelling element and its importance for the story:

I don't remember when I first heard the story but I remember the first time that I heard it and remembered it. By that I mean the first time it made an impression on me and more or less became *mine*; sort of went into me the way such things do, went into me in such a way that I knew it would not leave again but would remain there forever. (321)

The story that follows is a reflection of the narrator's inner world, an event that has been imprinted upon his psyche and has “remain[ed] there forever” (ibid). MacLeod's choice of words is indicative of the power of sight that dominates the rest of the narrative – “sunny day,” “light reflected and glinted off,” “gleaming rooftops” (ibid) – also, he mentions the scars that the story has left – that “will be forever on the outside, while the memory will remain forever deep within” (322). For MacLeod, memory plays an important role in his stories, as it is the cohesive power that usually holds the characters together when they face difficult choices.

Seeing is omnipresent and it is an inseparable element of one's belonging to the island's past and present; it also closely linked to the daily chores performed by the characters – the eating of the lobsters' black vein and the rest of the meat is thought to be “unsightly” (324), the lobsters in the wet sack at the back of the boat are just silhouettes, one “could see the movement, but not the individuals” (324). Belonging to the traditions of the island is not only expressed through the various customs of the people there but further strengthened through a constant comparison between the *mainland* (i.e. the rest of Canada) and the island that is Cape Breton. Early in the story, the father mentions that magical ability of *Da Shealladh* or “Second sight” (its English translation), while remarking that the best translation would be “two sights,” which also supports the idea of that mainland/island division. The two sights



stand for the Canadian traditions (mainly English), and for the Gaelic ones which do their best to preserve the old ways. The power of this "Second sight" is almost prophetic – one could look "through a hole in a magical white stone [and] could see distant contemporary events as well as those of the future" (326). (This element will be later transformed in D. R. MacDonald's "Eyestone," where the stone serves as a sight-recovering object.) Alongside the framework of storytelling, at some point the father mentions a prophet who was known to have possessed *Da Shealladh* and who functions as yet another nucleus to the story. The prophetic element goes back to the old traditions of the Gaelic tribes from Scotland and Ireland, and supports the view that when these people came to Canada looking for better living conditions, they did not forsake their ways of life, but brought them into the new world as part of their distinct identity.

Another important element that can be mentioned here is the very physical aspect of seeing, which is greatly expressed through the description of the isle of Canna as a place that is close and near the horizon, yet so far and difficult to get to. "Do you see Canna over there? Do you see the point of Canna?" (329) is a perpetual answer that the father used to ask the narrator. Despite the proximity of the island to the fishing grounds, Canna remains a place of mystery, a place where one is almost advised not to visit. When the two brothers ask their parents for permission to go and visit their grandparents, they receive a biblical answer that neither bears a reply, nor any source of new information: "Wait and see" (329). Echoing Saint John's Revelation, Chapter 6, the parents' response is similar to "Come and see," uttered by the four beasts signalling the beginning of the end of time. The two brothers' world as they know it is about to come to an end when they go to Canna. The island, thus, achieves a mythical and almost Armageddon-like quality of a place, where people have to bear witness to its wonders and to expect apocalyptic sightings. Cape Breton, and the islands in Nova Scotia in general, possess this magical quality that people often associate with the old traditions and with proximity to nature. Similar to the abovementioned prophet with the magical stone, the grandmother reads the two boys' teacups, acting like a *visionary*, and tells them of their trip to Canna, but does not finish her prophecy. This ushers in a level of uncertainty which in turn will add to the overall effect of *unseeing*, starting from the parents' obvious reluctance to provide a fully-fledged answer, to the unfinished teacup prophecy, and later to the parentage of the two brothers' grandfather (called "The Child of Uncertainty") and all the happenings surrounding those with the "Second sight."

The next important moment in the story is the actual journey the two brothers undertake to Canna, which from the very beginning is shrouded in mystery and uncertainty:



It was sunny when the boat left the wharf but as they proceeded along the coast it became cloudy and then it began to rain. The trip seemed long in the rain and the men told them to go into the boat’s cabin where they would be dry and where they could eat their lunch. It was almost impossible to see the figures on the wharf or to distinguish them as they moved about in their heavy oil slickers. (322)

The two brothers’ journey and arrival at Canna seems to belong to the dream world and everything unfolds as if in a vision – figures are undistinguishable, the weather conditions help to establish an overall effect of mystery and secrecy. The key word of *uncertainty* is following them like a shadow, like something that is there and at the same time is not. When asked about their destination and why they are travelling, the two brothers are met with even more uncertainty by the sailors on the wharf:

“To see our grandmother,” they said.

“Your grandmother?” he asked.

“Yes,” they said. “Our grandmother.”

“Oh,” they said. “Your grandmother, are you sure?”

“Of course,” they said, becoming a bit annoyed. For although they were more uncertain than they cared to admit, they did not want to appear so. (333)

The island of Canna is the repository of old values, of the Gaelic traditions that have been confined by the English and French values to the small isles, so it is perfectly understandable that the sailors who live there and still thrive in these traditions feel uncertain about the intentions of the two brothers. Everything that comes from the outside is seen as a possible threat to the heritage they preserve and hold dear. Those who do not belong to the island have to be tested before they are given permission to enter this sacred world, just like in old adventure romances. The weather conditions and the sailors are the first trial, the old blind woman and her world of shadows is the second one, and the ultimate one is the meeting with their grandparents. From the very entrance to her house (they mistakenly enter the house of the old woman, firmly believing that it is their grandparents’), the two brothers fall under the spell of the old place. Their vision is blurred by the “very little light” (335), the house is populated by various animals – dogs, cats, and even a lamb (the guardian, the sacred animal, and the sacrificial one) – and it is as if they have entered a witch’s house.

The old blind woman is presented as the Jungian wise old woman, who speaks in the language of olden times, and is surrounded by mythical beings. Here MacLeod uses the image of the old woman as an archetype for the Gaelic culture. Her life among animals brings her closer to nature (as opposed to the industrial world outside); this life spent in semi-darkness (shadowed and almost made blind by the dominant



traditions of Canada) sees her moving around a dilapidated house with broken objects lying around (signaling the jumpy transition between past traditions and present values), and she is seemingly oblivious to the cacophony around her (different people, languages, customs, and problems). Seeing in this moment is presented as just the opposite – the two brothers do not like what they see, they wish they could *unsee* that moment with the fornicating cats, the clutter of broken dishes, the grimy hands and long fingernails, and they wish to go back to the moment where they could *see* again and to which they really belong. *Unbelonging* comes from *unseeing*, a conscious decision of the two brothers to not understand the state of events they find themselves in. Even later, when they meet their real grandparents, they are still not able to see clearly, and neither is their grandfather able to see: "He stood blinking and swaying in the light, trying to focus his eyes upon them. He swayed back and forth, looking at them carefully and trying to see who they really were" (342).

The brothers have just come from the old blind woman's house to their grandparents', and momentarily are seen as coming from another plane of existence – as if something has clouded the eyes of their grandfather and is preventing him from seeing clearly (like the scales on the mackerel's eyes). The two children have entered the world of Canna from the outside and have become marked in the old woman's house, turning into intermediate beings who display characteristics of both the outside world of the present, and the traditional internal world of the past. What they see and experienced in the blind woman's house is not enough to grant them permission to *belong* to this world – they too do not recognize their grandfather, for he appears different here than he is on the mainland. The same happens when the two brothers visit a store where the man who gave them a ride to the blind woman's house works, and they fail to identify him as well. On the whole, Canna appears to possess protean features, almost dream-like with its inhabitants changing contours, and not retaining their faces and behaviour for too long. Everything on Canna belongs to the old Gaelic traditions, the rituals ("riding their horses on Michaelmas and carrying the bodies of their dead round toward the sun" (347)) and beliefs of the old mould the very core of the society. The blind woman, the drunk and disheveled grandfather, the unknown store-owner – they all belong to Canna, to its past and present, and they all see Canna with their tradition-layered eyes (like the mackerel who have scales at first, but when they return, their scales have fallen off). The outsiders *see* Canna differently, they very often fail to see it clearly for the obvious reason that they have grown strangers to the Gaelic traditions and have lost their place among the sacred and the old, as well as having accumulated *unbelonging* that is difficult to get rid of for it belongs to the *mainland* world, the visible one.



D. R. MacDonald’s “Eyestone”

The second story analyzed here is “Eyestone,” a story which is much shorter than the 40-page “Vision” but which nonetheless offers great insight into the topic. From the very beginning, the reader is presented with a motto that established the uncertain and almost eerie atmosphere that is about to follow suit: “An ancient chill is rippling the dark brooks” (MacDonald 1988, 21). The motto comes from a poem by American Elizabeth Bishop poet, “Cape Breton,” and is important because MacDonald’s story is also set in Cape Breton, and further illustrates the power of one’s belonging to the old traditions and the rejuvenating and at the same time destructive powers of history. Cape Breton is an ancient world where traditions are kept alive and where strangers are seldom welcomed. There are ancient powers that govern the island, and its dark brooks are not for the naked eye, one should come prepared. Just like in MacLeod’s “Vision,” MacDonald’s story abounds in lexical tools that usher the reader into the realm of seeing from the very beginning: there are “eyes, horizon, watches, bright, darkened, light” (21–22), all words associated with one’s ability to see. The story deals with the protagonist, Royce, who buys a house from an old couple, so he can live there with his wife. But the husband, Mr. Corbett asks Royce to let his wife live in the house for her remaining days after he is gone, and Royce succumbs to his wish, unaware of Mr. Corbett’s decision to take his own life. Royce’s wife finds it strange to wait for the old woman to die, so she moves to the mainland (another opposition found in “Vision” – mainland versus island) and leaves Royce to deal with the matter alone. During one of Royce’s walks in the forests, he injures his eye and there is no one else to help him but the old Mrs. Corbett, a neighbour he uses as an inspiration for a painting, but from whom he nevertheless remains distant for there is “much about [her] he does not understand” (22). However, the act of seeing as understanding is not reciprocal – Mrs. Corbett is able to see and understand Royce in an easier way than he does because she belongs to the old traditions; her eyes could easily penetrate his soul, while Royce remains the outsider, the trespasser.

It is important to note that Royce is an outsider, he does not belong to the island, and his ancestors never lived there. He is a painter – a person who creates what he *sees* either with his own eyes (portraying the physical world), or with his inner sight (the metaphysical). Thus, Royce is presented as a person who is closer to nature than the two brothers from “Vision” – he cannot see clearly due to his lack of past, but there are moments when his heart and soul can, for example, in a dream he had “he foresaw this barn, in his daydreams back in Boston” (24). The dreams come to him as visions, as images that are transplanted into his psyche with the move to Canada, as if the very land he now possesses tries to talk to him. In contrast to the short sight of the two young boys, who are unable to see through the weather conditions or the



dark interior of the blind woman’s house, Royce’s sight is closer to his new belonging. The magical setting of the place starts to work its wonders on Royce the outsider. He goes deeper and deeper into the world around him, into the world that he wants to see both as a painter and as a person, the world that he is going to live in. MacDonald uses simple natural descriptions in order to present some long lost connection that is slowly but steadily being regained by Royce: “[He] squints at the white-grey sky. The sun burns somewhere. He can feel its heat, and for a moment a sudden aimlessness comes over him” (26).

Once again, the author shows that the physical quality of *seeing* is not sufficient for the person to *understand*, even when it comes to simple objects. Everything around Royce is filtered through his other senses – hearing, smelling, feeling, but seeing remains a *terra incognita* for him. And here comes the important element: how can one be made to *see* when all the usual prerequisites are insufficient? The answer comes in the form of an attack to Royce’s physical sight; his eye is injured when a branch snaps back, and a piece of the bark remains inside his eye. This is very similar to the adventure stories where the hero has to undergo a difficult trial or to suffer an impediment to his abilities that would later be healed by the holy grail of his sacred destination. And it is for the very first time after the injury that Royce is able to see Mrs. Corbett better, who in one way or another, stands for the repository of old values and traditions, just as Canna does in MacLeod’s story: “He wonders if she has looked like this always, gaunt, straight, her eyes pale as beach shells. He has tried to sketch her in the past, but always at a distance or from memory, the versions as varied as his own moods” (30). Just as the old woman from Canna becomes the major impetus for change in the interconnected stories, so too does Royce’s near-blinding cause change. Mrs. Corbett is finally given physical form, however distorted through the splinter in Royce’s eye, and is finally able to answer the questions that have plagued Royce for so long. At the same time she remains as elusive as ever, resembling a phantom, a being from the world of spirits: “Through his shimmering vision she seems already to be disappearing” (31). Royce’s mission is to talk to Mrs. Corbett and to *understand* when she is going to vacate the house so he and his wife could move in, but during the time he spends around, uncertain of his abilities to speak directly to her, Royce’s mission (or journey) changes and he finds himself on the road to another discovery that is his sole purpose in life.

Similar to the prophetic element in “Vision,” where MacLeod describes the method of looking through a magical stone to see distant and past events, MacDonald uses a similar model, a little round stone that Mrs. Corbett places under Royce’s eyelid and which is believed to cure sight problems. The moment the stone is placed on its predestined place, Royce’s vision changes – Mrs. Corbett’s contours blur and his world is filled once again with shadows and silhouettes, just like the figures on the wharf for



the two brothers in MacLeod’s story. The old world of wonders enters Royce’s real life and literally opens his vision for the events that are to follow. He understands that his wife is never coming back, and that his mission with Mrs. Corbett was more of a journey that he made up so he could find out more about himself. The various simple questions that he asks Mrs. Corbett – about the name of a strange bird he is unable to identify or of her family and past – serve as a way to win more time in order to clear his vision. With MacLeod, the wise old woman appears before the two young boys in the form of an old blind woman, while MacDonald chooses an elderly lady whose husband commits suicide, with excellent (eye)sight, and who is well-versed in the old traditions, sharing a deep belonging to the land. Both Royce and the two boys exit the two houses refreshed and with eyes opened a little bit wider than before. And as with most fairy tales and legends, the archetypal wise woman disappears at the end of the journey – the blind old woman dies in a fire, while MacDonald’s Mrs. Corbett just vanishes into thin air, thus fulfilling Royce’s initial journey’s mission of finding his own place in the world.

Conclusion

In both Alistair MacLeod’s “Vision” and D. R. MacDonald’s “Eyestone,” the idea of seeing as one’s prerequisite and perhaps most important part in belonging to a particular place is strongly expressed through various aspects. While MacLeod focuses more on the old legends, the magical, and the shadow-enveloped relationships, MacDonald places his characters in a more modern, yet not clearer and comprehensible surroundings. The power that the land exerts upon the characters is made visible through the various elements that deter the characters from reaching their respective destinations – be it the tempestuous and obscure weather conditions, along with the different customs and traditions of the people from Canna in MacLeod’s story, or the impossibility for Royce’s wife to live on the land that his husband bought, together with the diverse visible and invisible forces that block the way. The metaphysic aspect of seeing goes hand in hand with the transcendental quality of one’s belonging to a particular place, or to a particular set of ideas and beliefs. The problems that arise with the protagonists’ ability to see and belong stem from the difficulties this new life (“Eyestone”) or new experience (“Vision”) pose for them. All things considered, the two authors have managed to catch the unique atmosphere of the (in)visible world in both their stories and have quite successfully expressed the idea that one’s place in the world can be easily found or lost, depending on their efforts and attitude towards the beliefs, customs, and traditions that characterize a specific place. The blindness of the characters serves as both a punishment and a penance, for it is through their



loss of sight that they are reborn and that their future generations can see better. The temporary loss of sight of MacDonald’s Royce serves an even greater purpose – eventually he achieves his initial aim, but gains much more than that: he discovers the magic of the place he can call home – he finds a place where, in contrast to his wife’s metaphorical blindness, he can finally belong.

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ALEXANDER KOSTOV / is a PhD student at “St. Kliment Ohridski” Sofia University in Bulgaria. He graduated with a BA in 2012, and later received his MA in Communication and Literature in 2014, his primary interest being the evolution of the horror genre in literature. His current field of research is Canadian culture and literature, and the province of Nova Scotia in particular. Furthermore, he is interested in the genre of the short story, and its traditions, flourishing, and position in Canada as a whole. In his research he pays close attention to such writers as Alistair MacLeod, D. R. MacDonald and Carol Bruneau.

